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Industry perceptions of intercultural competence in Singapore and Perth

This study investigates public relations practitioner perceptions of intercultural competence i.e. the skills required in an increasingly globalized world. The findings, drawn from analysis of interviews with seventeen practitioners in two cities in Australasia, reveal intercultural competence is perceived as integral to public relations practise, regardless of whether the public relations activity occurs across national borders. Although practitioners value personal attributes such as openness and adaptability, the findings suggests that practitioners require intercultural competence, as procedural knowledge i.e. of specific cultures and as conceptual knowledge i.e. a reflexive and dynamic understanding of culture. More research is needed to understand the relationship between culture and public relations, and industry expectations regarding intercultural competence in an era of globalization.

Keywords: public relations; globalization; international; culture; intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Public relations in the twenty-first century is recognised as a global practise (Tilson & Alozie, 2004; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), requiring intercultural competence, that is the "understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement" (Heyward, 2002, p. 10). In this paper, culture refers to the "social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated, exchanged" (Thwaites, Davis & Mules, 1994, p. 1). Intercultural competence is significant for public relations, as globalization means it is "increasingly impossible to escape communicating across national, cultural and linguistic borders" (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 27) as publics become more culturally "diverse and global" (Sriramesh, 2009a, p. *xxxv*).

Responding to calls for a renewed focus on culture and more qualitative and ethnographic approaches in public relations scholarship (Hodges, 2006; Pal & Dutta, 2008; L'Etang, 2011), this study explores industry perceptions in two countries of intercultural competence. It investigates the practitioner perspective in order to understand the lived experience of practitioners who negotiate 'culture(s)' as part of their everyday practise. Interviews were conducted with 17 public relations practitioners in two cities in the Australasian region in April-May 2011. This study uses an interpretive approach to develop theoretical insights from their perceptions of intercultural competence.

The aim of this paper is to investigate practitioner expectations of intercultural competence in public relations practise in Perth and Singapore. There are five sections. In the first, the impact of globalization on public relations is reviewed. Second, the relationship between culture and public relations is considered. In the third section, a brief comparison of Perth and Singapore acknowledges their different cultural, political and economic contexts. Fourth, participant perceptions of intercultural competence in public relations practise are discussed in the following categories: intercultural challenges in public relations practise; contexts for intercultural competence; and expectations of intercultural competence in employees. In the final section, the analysis of these perceptions confirms practitioners recognise public relations expertise requires intercultural competence. These findings inform theoretical insights into the significance of intercultural competence for public relations practise, and more broadly, of the relationship between culture and public relations.

2. Background to the study

2.1 Globalization and public relations

In the last decade, public relations scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the impact of globalization on public relations, but its impact is "underresearched" (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 5) and undertheorized (Pal & Dutta, 2008). One issue is the failure to consider "transnational interconnections" meaning public relations industries are often studied in national terms (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 5). Although research in different countries has highlighted the diversity in public relations practises, and the influence of different social, cultural and environmental factors (see Sriramesh 2004; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), in reality, public relations activity often occurs on a regional or global scale, where: "this

process across cultures is more than simple translations from one language to another, but rather draws on specific values which cross many national boundaries" (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009, p. 5). Research into "complex experiences of the globalized world" (Pal & Dutta, 2008, p. 177) is therefore important to understand the impact of globalization on public relations, and to develop a better understanding of the relationship between culture and public relations. In particular, public relations researchers need to consider more fully how a "transcultural practitioner" addresses the dynamic nature of culture in response to "global forces" (Bardhan, 2011, p. 78).

2.2 Culture and public relations

Culture was identified as a variable in the Excellence study, where it was perceived to be significant in terms of both organizational and societal culture in fostering excellent public relations (Sriramesh & White, 1992; Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). However, as Sriramesh (2004; 2009b) and others (Kent & Taylor, 2007; Pal & Dutta, 2008; Bardhan & Weaver, 2011) have noted, public relations research tends to be ethnocentric and, until recently, failed to address the Anglo-American contexts in which the 'dominant paradigm' emerged (Pieczka, 2006). For example, studies of public relations in other countries compare the level of 'professionalism' against a U.S. benchmark (Fitch & Surma, 2006) or offer principles for global public relations drawn from a theory of Excellent public relations developed out of studies in the U.S., Canada and the U.K. (Verčič, Grunig & Grunig, 1996). Other studies focus on the needs of multinational companies where practitioners rely on local expertise to "translate" local culture for multinational companies (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang & Lyra, 1995), or, in one of the few studies into intercultural

competence and public relations practise, assess the preparedness of U.S. practitioners to undertake international assignments (Freitag, 2002). Significantly, public relations scholarship, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, drew on the work of Geert Hofstede to compare various dimensions of national cultures; however, much of this work adopts essentialist approaches, which fail to recognise diversity within, or indeed, across cultures (Courtright, Wolfe & Baldwin, 2011) and conceptualise culture as a static, unified entity rather than as dynamic and socially constructed meaning-making processes (Daymon & Surma, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2011).

A more dynamic understanding of culture and its relation with public relations allows recognition of the underlying Western ideology of public relations practice (Pal & Dutta, 2008) and the role of public relations in meaning-making processes (Daymon & Surma, 2009). Public relations is a cultural practise and communicates across cultural borders (L'Etang, 2011), demanding practitioners apply intercultural communication to publics of different cultural backgrounds, by understanding how culture influences public relations activity (Banks, 2000). Practitioners are "culture-workers" as their work involves "multiple overlapping cultures" beyond national or ethnic cultures and including organizational and other cultural contexts (L'Etang, 2011, p. 19). The practitioner role, then, is that of "cultural agent" (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009, p. 7), a role which demands sound knowledge of "the cultural attributes of his/her publics"; the development of "messages which resonate with all publics" (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009, p. 8); "knowledge of world affairs" and reflexivity, as they need to see "the world around them on terms other than their own" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 262). Practitioners are also cultural intermediaries in that they actively create and recreate culture and shape meanings (Hodges, 2006; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Daymon & Surma,

2009). Therefore, studies which "emphasise the perspectives and experiences of public relations practitioners in their role as social agents within the culture they study" (Hodges, 2006, p. 83) offer alternative understandings of public relations and its role in society.

2.3 Singapore and Perth

As this study developed out of a curriculum project, practitioners in the two locations where the researcher's university has the most public relations students, Singapore and Perth, were interviewed. Perth, with a population of 1.63 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), is the capital of the state of Western Australia. It is the most multicultural city in Australia, with the highest percentage (32.5%) of overseas born residents and over 200 different cultural groups (Government of Western Australia, 2010). Fifteen per cent of Australia's Indigenous, or Aboriginal, people live in Western Australia and account for 3.8% of the state's population (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). The government has had a multicultural policy since the 1980s, specifically linking "Australia's multicultural composition" to "national identity" and identifying the right of diverse cultural groups to "practise and share their cultural traditions and languages" (Government of Australia, 2011, p. 2). The Australian government funds the Special Broadcasting Service, a national radio and TV network, to offer multilingual and multicultural programs. Government communications are often available in multiple languages.

The population of Singapore is 5.08 million, of which 3.23 million are Singaporean citizens (Singapore Statistics, 2010). Singapore also has a

multicultural population: of the 5.08 million residents in Singapore, 74.1% are Chinese; 13.4% are Malay; 9.2% are Indian; and 3.3% are 'other' (Singapore Statistics, 2010). The four official languages are English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil although English is the main language for business, education and administration (Chay-Németh, 2009). Singapore government policies include bilingual education in the official languages mandating English and a 'mother tongue' language (based on ethnicity) (Silver, 2004). A long-running 'Speak Mandarin' campaign promotes Mandarin in favour of Chinese dialects; the government restricts the use of Chinese dialects in the media to a few niche subscription radio and community TV stations (Silver, 2004; Weber, Tan & Law, 2008).

Singapore and Australia are highly globalized countries, ranking in the top tier of the Global Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum, 2010). Singapore is the highest-ranked country in the Asia-Pacific region, and ranks third in the world; Australia ranks sixteenth out of 139 countries (World Economic Forum, 2010, pp. 14, 28). Singapore has a controlled media, limits on freedom of speech and a high degree of self censorship and regulation among journalists (Freedom House, 2011). In a study which rates media independence in 196 countries, the media in Australia was rated 'free' with a score of 21 and in Singapore 'not free' with a score of 0 (Freedom House, 2011). In Singapore, race and religion are sensitive issues (Chay-Németh, 2009), and the media supports government ideology, particularly around national development, the promotion of social harmony and nation-building (Cenite et al., 2008).

Historically, public relations in Singapore was dominated by first colonial, and then government, campaigns to promote nation-building and social cohesion (Freitag & Stokes, 2009). The 1980s in Singapore saw an increase in the number of multinational companies, which broadened the scope of public relations, and in the last two decades, the public relations industry developed in tandem with the competitive, knowledge-based economy (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005; Chay-Németh, 2009). Multinational public relations firms, such as Edelman and Ogilvy Singapore, have a significant regional role from the Singapore hub (Singapore Economic Development Bureau [SEDB], 2011). Ogilvy Singapore, for example, employs 500 people of 19 nationalities, and has 20 multinational lead clients (SEDB, 2011).

Public relations in Australia is described as "Westernized, localized, informal, and nonspecialized," with Western global business practises modified by national and state-based multicultural policies and issues and a relatively small market (Motion & Leitch, 2005, p. 49). Although histories of Australian public relations tend to focus on its emergence from U.S. military information structures in World War II, some studies suggest it had a much earlier role, particular in government nation-building campaigns (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010). Despite the presence of international consultancies, public relations activity mostly has a national focus (Motion & Leitch, 2005). In one study of the Australian public relations industry, in which 44% of the respondents were from Western Australia, approximately one-third of practitioners worked in consultancies, one-third in government, and the remaining third split between corporate and non-profit sectors (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009).

3. Methodology

This research aims to investigate practitioner understandings and expectations of intercultural competence in public relations practise in Perth and Singapore. It addresses calls for a more culture-centred approach to public relations research by investigating practitioner perceptions of public relations to determine "the range of meanings they hold, as found in their respective histories, cultures, and political and economic systems" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 256). Interpretive research allows an understanding of the complexities of culture in global public relations practise and "facilitates the understanding of public relations as communicative and cocreational rather than simply as a management function" (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 14). The researcher therefore used semi-structured interviews to investigate the perspectives and complex experiences of practitioners towards intercultural competence (Hodges, 2006; Pal & Dutta, 2008). The sample size allows in-depth data to be collected (Kuzel, 1999, cited in Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Interviews with 17 public relations employers were conducted in Perth and Singapore over approximately one month in April-May 2011. Research participants, recruited via emailing the researcher's professional networks through a snowball sampling technique, were senior public relations practitioners with experience in different roles and sectors and in recruiting public relations employees. At least one Australian participant had worked in Asia, and the Singaporean participants included expatriates from Australia and India. A table identifying each participant's current location, role, organization type and industry sector is included in this report (see Table 1). Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any stage. Ethics approval was granted by the researcher's university.

Interviews in Perth were conducted by a research assistant, while interviews in Singapore were conducted by the researcher. An interview guide and training, in the form of mock interviews, ensured a consistent approach. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were offered the opportunity to review and amend the transcript as a member-check to ensure validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transcripts were analysed for patterns and themes, using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and a critical approach (Motion & Weaver, 2005). Findings are reported under these themes and sub-themes, using direct quotations from the participants to illustrate their perspectives.

3.1 Scope and limitations

This study investigates the perceptions of practitioners in Singapore and Perth towards intercultural competence. Analysing interviews requires "a critical and reflective stance" as the spoken statements may not accurately reflect industry practise (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 185). Nevertheless, analysis of the interviews reveals rich data, which can be used to inform understandings of public relations in a globalized world. The findings, like most qualitative research, are not generalisable. However, by situating this study within public relations scholarship on culture, the findings may encompass transferability (Daymon & Holloway, 2002) and offer alternative insights into the relationship between public relations and culture.

The research reported in this study emerged from a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional project on internationalisation of the curriculum. The curricular implications and the

development of intercultural competence in public relations education are reported elsewhere (Fitch & Desai, 2012). The focus of this paper is the analysis of practitioner perspectives in two cities in the Australasian region.

The researcher is an Australian academic who teaches public relations in four countries, including Singapore and Australia. Her research interests include the Singaporean public relations industry, fostered through frequent visits for teaching and industry liaison, and transnational public relations education.

4. Intercultural challenges in public relations practise

4.1 Defining public relations

One of the challenges in researching industry practise is the diversity in understandings of what constitutes public relations. Participants in this study variously described public relations as brand marketing; media relations; social justice advocacy and fundraising; strategic positioning and planning; corporate social responsibility; investor relations; internal communication; lobbying; government relations; marketing communication; corporate communication; community consultation; and stakeholder engagement. In the words of one Australian participant: “we do everything: policy, strategy, promotion, community engagement”. Although “a lot of people think PR is the capacity to write a nice press release,” the participants hold senior positions, which allowed them to focus on high-level strategy and counselling. For example, one participant describes their work: “I [do] environmental policies, social policies, corporate social responsibility policies and make sure that we get them cascaded down to the operational level.” Participants perceived public relations as diverse activity, requiring an acute awareness of cultural contexts in order “to consult and engage” effectively with different groups.

According to one participant, intercultural competence "underlie[s] a lot of the techniques" of public relations.

4.2 Understanding globalisation

Participants perceived an understanding of news and current affairs as "critical for public relations professionals" as "we are…in a globalised community and you need to understand [your work] in a broader context." This understanding was perceived as important even if one's role did not entail working across national borders, allowing participants to "better…advise …employers…or…clients." However, many participants described international public relations activity as a routine part of their work. In the resource sector, this may be because the company has significant assets in developing countries in Asia or Africa as well as international clients; in other sectors, it was because their role involved public relations across Australasia. According to one Singapore-based participant: "very few of our clients come to us for Singapore support… the counsel and strategy that we provide them is cross-country." Practitioners in Singapore were more likely to have a regional (i.e. Asia-Pacific) rather than a national focus, describing campaigns which "launch[ed]…here in Singapore and then involved "talking to media…from maybe six or seven Southeast Asian countries."

4.3 Understanding intercultural competence

Participants had diverse responses to the concept of intercultural competence, with some referring immediately to international public relations, particularly where they regularly worked with clients, or on projects, outside Singapore or Australia. Several participants related intercultural competence to the workplace, describing their

culturally diverse work teams. Other participants, particularly those who worked in Australia, related intercultural competence to multiculturalism and what that meant for the development of communication campaigns and stakeholder engagement. One Perth-based participant, who had worked at senior levels across the Asia-Pacific region, defined intercultural competence as: “explaining and accepting the differences, [recognising] one shoe doesn’t fit all.”

For other participants, intercultural competence was perceived as the need to not offend others, even unwittingly, through ignorance of their cultural norms. For some Singaporean participants, intercultural competence was not an easy concept to discuss in relation to public relations campaigns and activities in Singapore. This difficulty may be because cultural sensitivity is engrained: “people just kind of know what to do” and mindfulness around cultural nuances is “inculcated in Singaporean youth.” Cultural challenges did not relate only to campaigns; one consultant in Singapore described their client base, which represented India, the U.S., Italy, Australia, New Zealand, U.K. and China, demanding expertise in “the way you deal with them, the personalities, because of cultural differences.”

5. Contexts for intercultural competence

5.1 Public relations at home

Perceptions of the relevance of intercultural competence within each country varied. Generally, Australia was viewed by both Australian and Singaporean participants as “a melting pot” due to its cultural diversity. The adaptation of government communication campaigns for diverse cultural groups in Australia is common: “we do things in different languages, up to 15 different languages.” In

another example, an Australian participant developed a campaign to alert specifically the Vietnamese community to the dangers of abalone fishing. In contrast, although campaigns in Singapore occasionally target the Chinese community for a "Chinese consumer product," specific campaigns were rarely developed for other ethnic groups, with Singaporean participants agreeing there was little need to adapt campaigns to account for cultural diversity:

> I think that's because in Singapore, we are quite homogenous. For example, English is our national language, so you never have to worry about being mindful of whether the person can understand English or not. In terms of religious or in terms of other cultural mindfulness, I don't think in Singapore there's a problem. So I think in fact trying to deal with locals, it really doesn't matter whether this person is of a particular ethnic background.

Government policies and regulation appear to influence practises and understandings of public relations in Singapore, particularly in relation to culturally diverse publics within the city-state. In a notable exception, and a temporary reversal of policy during the SARS outbreak, the Singapore government allowed speeches, media interviews and broadcasts in Chinese dialects in national media (Weber, Tan & Law, 2008).

5.2 Working internationally

Many participants described working with other countries in a public relations capacity. Participants in the Perth-based NGO and in local and state government had worked extensively with NGO staff from other countries; managed sister-city relationships; and developed international recruitment campaigns to address skill shortages in Western Australia. In Singapore, the regional role of many practitioners is pronounced as the city-state is the base from where many campaigns are launched across Asia.

Participants articulated specific challenges working across borders, because “you need to understand the culture of the country in which you are working” perceiving their role as requiring intercultural competence. For example, several participants identified particular challenges working in China, including the need to be aware of “protocols about how you deal with Chinese business people, Chinese bureaucrats, what’s acceptable, what’s not, what’s polite, what’s not, there’s a whole heap of protocol around that.” They perceived the practitioner’s responsibility was to ensure “your higher management are briefed on correct dealings with that country” and to organise “cultural training with your directors and managers.” However, a bigger challenge was perceived as “strategic planning…in an international context that’s really complex.” One participant used the example of a current project in a developing country with a violent, recent history:

> you could not…be a corporate affairs team member on that project unless you had the capacity to move a lot of your thinking that’s based on living and working in Australia into the headspace of that community and that culture with that interesting and complex history.

In the shift from understanding intercultural competence as cultural protocols to a more reflexive conceptualisation, this participant suggests that public relations expertise demands cultural reflexivity in practitioners and the practitioner role as that of cultural intermediary.

5.3 *Communicating with Indigenous communities*

Australian participants, particularly in government agencies with a significant proportion of Aboriginal clients and the resource sector where participants might work

with Aboriginal communities in remote areas, perceived a lack of understanding of "the particular issues that related to communications with Aboriginal people" among practitioners. One participant described how they recruited "an Aboriginal person specifically for Aboriginal communications…to bring that understanding about particular cultural issues." Similarly, a resource-sector participant in Singapore recruited and trained local staff to ensure the necessary intercultural competence when working with Indigenous communities, such as the Orang Asli, in Malaysia:

> they share the same cultural background so…my local colleagues can actually empathise with what they are feeling which makes the negotiation more fruitful…it can be quite dangerous if you just go in there and impose our views on the local people…because you always take your own international perspective and then you think that it's right, because it's universal, or common sense, whatever, but not as far as these people are concerned…that's why we are very mindful.

Their rationale for understanding the local perspective is primarily to ensure the viability of their business operations. Both resource sector participants perceived an additional challenge in dealing with NGOs, who "represent the local communities."

5.4 Doing media relations in different countries

Participants with experience of media relations in several countries described diverse practises; this diversity makes explicit the impact of cultural, political and media systems on public relations practises.

> In Australia you can send out a press release but the chances of it getting picked up by the media publications is zero. However if you…use the press release to structure an independent interview pitch with the journalist they're much more

> likely to bite. In Indonesia, however, you need to send out that information in Bahasa Indonesian to get a wider pick up. In Malaysia they're more receptive to follow up phone calls to chase them about picking up a press release. In China, with 500 publications across three major cities, there's no way you can do that, so you tend to use a news distribution service…when you call people [in China and Vietnam] for a press conference it is very common to hand them a packet of money which ostensibly goes to cover their travel fees but is basically a commitment for them to write your story.

Other participants noted media relations practices in Singapore and Australia as similar and vastly different to the "payola" system of some countries where news stories are paid for, and even written by, the public relations practitioner, or where journalists are paid to attend press conferences. Some of the multinational companies refused to pay for this activity.

6. Intercultural competence and public relations employees

6.1 Valuing personal attributes

The theme of openness, or an open personality, was considered important by many of the participants. For example, an Australian participant looked for "the willingness and openness to understanding cultural differences" in potential employees. Similarly, a Singaporean participant in the government sector, whose work involves facilitating visits from international delegations, perceived an "open personality" allows the necessary adaptation and flexibility to meet the demands of the role. Another Singaporean participant responded: "you need to have…an open mindset to deal with various cultures and people with different backgrounds, ways and religions and nationalities."

Expatriate employers in Singapore valued Western cultural practises around assertiveness. For example, one participant considered the hierarchy in Singaporean society challenging for the idea of "openness," particularly when the public relations role involved strategic counselling to senior managers: "I think this does become a cultural issue because what I've noticed in Asia is that people are typically trained to respect authority and hierarchy and a lot of Asian businesses are built around hierarchical structures." Another participant looked for the ability to speak out in potential employees, because "we have brainstorms and you'll sit around the table, no one will say a word," while another looked for an "innate sense of curiosity" and "an ability to question things, which I think is crucial for a communications person." These perceptions are echoed in a study, which cited a practitioner who perceived a lack of the "aggression and extrovertion [sic] needed in the profession" in Asian countries (Chay-Németh, 2009, p. 168). Another Singaporean participant, with experience in

multinational corporations, commented that employer expectations varied considerably between multinational companies: “with different companies it’s different cultures: the Japanese, Korean, American, and European companies [have] different cultures.”

6.2 Speaking other languages

Several participants agreed a second language offered an awareness of other cultures and a degree of reflexivity about their own culture. In this situation, the particular language was not relevant: “Even if it was French, I don’t mind…just showed me they could go outside the box.” For one Australian, now working in a regional role in Asia, learning a language at high school contributed to their understanding of other cultures and their ability to work with others in that “it gave me a sense of awareness of cultural difference and knowing and recognising signals, particularly non-verbal cues, when dealing with people of different cultures.”

Many of the Singaporean participants were bilingual or multilingual through family heritage, formal study or the Singaporean education system. The following description of a consultancy, which includes several nationalities, is typical:

> Most of our consultants speak English and Chinese; I've got a Filipino colleague who speaks Tagalog…our Malaysian colleagues…speak Bahasa and possibly Cantonese as well. You don't have to learn how to write but you should be able to have a conversation because we’re going to have to tap on those skills.

When asked if a specific language might rank a potential employee more highly, participants in Singapore suggested that it would depend on the existing skillset of the team or business needs; for example, proficiency in Mandarin or Bahasa might be

useful if the company has “a bigger footprint” in China or Indonesia, or if no-one else spoke those languages. Participants in Perth and Singapore agreed specific language expertise could be bought in when required. The exception was in dealings with China; several participants perceived the need for “business Mandarin”. However, demand in the employment market for specific languages changed depending on “what you see as an upcoming economic power.”

6.3 Experiencing other cultures

The experience of living, working in and even travelling to other countries was considered valuable for professional development. One participant stated:

> [Practitioners who have studied or worked in other countries] are examples of people who have spread their wings and lifted their eyes above their own little world and looked outside of that. I think that can only help your skills as a PR professional because you’ve got a sense of what’s out there and it also demonstrate[s] to me initiative, flexibility, a desire for challenges and to learn things: all the traits that we want in a good communication person.

The experience of living in another country was perceived as potentially transformative: “they're taken out of their comfort zone…when they come back, they have a very different appreciation for working in multicultural environments as compared to people who have never stepped out.” But international experience was not considered essential for public relations practise, as an open personality was perceived by participants as more important.

7. Discussion

Participants identified numerous examples of intercultural challenges they experienced

in their professional practise. Some challenges related to transnational work, but many related to public relations activity within their own countries. Drawing on Bardhan (2011) and L'Etang (2011), public relations practise is transcultural even when practitioners are not engaged in international activity. Given Singapore and Perth are both multicultural cities, the recognition of the need for intercultural competence in public relations practise among research participants is not surprising. However, there were divergent understandings of the role of intercultural competence in public relations, demonstrating the impact of different cultural, political and professional contexts.

Intercultural competence was broadly perceived in terms of understanding difference and the need to communicate with, or engage, stakeholders effectively. The Australian government commitment to multiculturalism and possibly the number of government participants in this study influenced the Australian participants' awareness of culturally diverse publics and their commitment to incorporating such diversity into campaigns. Only one Australian participant suggested intercultural competence was not highly significant in their communication role as their publics were "not representative of the changing cultural diversity of Perth." Singaporean participants described examples of the need for intercultural competence in a professional context, but these examples tended to involve work with international campaigns or clients, or in the diverse workplace. Few acknowledged the impact of cultural diversity within Singapore on their professional practise, in terms of campaign development, with two participants describing local campaigns as "homogenous". This finding is surprising but could stem from government policies and laws reinforcing the need for social harmony, sensitivity around race, and the "mindfulness", which in the words of one participant was

"inculcated in Singapore youth." The concept of '*kiasuism*' which promotes "self censorship" and self-regulation (Chay-Németh, 2009, p. 168) may apply. A resistance by some participants to discussing cultural difference within Singapore society was noted by the researcher in her field notes, but did not extend to the expatriate participants in Singapore. However, they acknowledged it would be rare to adapt a communication campaign within Singapore for a particular cultural group.

The regional role of many companies and offices based in Singapore—and the 'region' sometimes included Australia and New Zealand—meant that Singapore-based practitioners were much more comfortable discussing cultural difference in relation to 'others' i.e. in relation to public relations activity, or clients in, other countries. Participants perceived many similarities between public relations practises in Singapore and Australia: in both locations, public relations was perceived as modern, sophisticated and transparent. For example, paying for editorial media coverage was perceived as confined to "other countries".

Only one Singaporean participant had not studied at an Australian or American university; the "cultural imperialism" (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 10) inherent in public relations practise and developed in part through education at Western universities deserves further investigation. The expatriates working in Singapore valued employees who could speak out and challenge their managers; however, such assertiveness could be viewed as a 'Western' practise, which undermines Singaporean notions of '*kiasuism*' and hierarchical workplace structures. At the same time, participants valued personal attributes such as "initiative and flexibility" and viewed these traits as essential in "a good communication person".

Singaporean participants were more likely to value specific language skills. In contrast, Australian participants rarely recruited on the basis of a specific language skill, yet valued the exposure to other cultures gained through knowledge of another language. Language is conceived as offering the conceptual categories for cultural meaning. Participants in both locations articulated a demand for greater intercultural competence in relation to China, where English was not commonly spoken, cultural differences were perceived as great, and where—thanks to the tiger economy—there is an ever-increasing demand for public relations activity. Here, intercultural competence is perceived as a kind of procedural knowledge i.e. an awareness of rules, protocols and processes in relation to specific cultures. Intercultural competence in relation to one cultural group may be desirable but depend very much on the particular role and context in which participants worked. For example, few practitioners were perceived to possess the necessary intercultural competence to deal with Indigenous communities, but such skills were highly sought after by participants in the Australian government and resource sectors. The role of the practitioner here is 'cultural worker' in ensuring appropriate cultural protocols are met.

In addition to competence in specific cultures, intercultural competence was conceptualized as an integral component of public relations expertise. Other research suggests from the practitioner perspective, public relations expertise "is seen as constituted and transmitted through practice" (Pieczka, 2002, p. 321), and professionalism construed in terms of personal attributes (van Ruler, 2005). In this study, although practitioners perceived intercultural competence could be based on personal attributes such as "openness" and "adaptability", they also perceived

intercultural competence as recognising how awareness of culturally diverse publics—including clients, colleagues and other stakeholders—should be integrated into all public relations activity. To do so demands considerable reflexivity on the part of the practitioner, who must be able to "lift up their eyes" by being aware of the influence and impact of their own cultural heritage. As one practitioner noted "it can be quite dangerous if you just go in there and impose…your own …perspective." The difference between procedural knowledge, which is situation-specific, and conceptual knowledge, which can be applied to new and different situations, may suggest the value of intercultural competence for public relations practise. Participants recognised demand for intercultural competence in specific cultures changes in response to market forces and the changing demographics of a national population, and did not distinguish between the significance of intercultural competence for public relations practise in terms of interpersonal skills (in client management and in the workplace) and communication management (in terms of communication strategy and campaign development and implementation). Therefore, practitioners should be able to adapt to a range of communication challenges in diverse contexts particularly when culture is viewed as fluid and heterogeneous, rather than fixed (Daymon & Surma, 2009). The findings reported in this study suggest the need for more research into the global public relations practitioner (Verčič, 2009), with a particular focus on how practitioners perceive their role as 'cultural intermediaries' i.e. how their work contributes to, and shapes, social discourses.

8. Conclusion

This study reports practitioner understandings and expectations of intercultural competence in public relations, drawn from the analysis of interviews conducted

with 17 practitioners in Singapore and Perth. Their experiences, and their expectations of potential employees, reveal they perceive intercultural competence is integral to public relations practise, as it underpinned and informed their work. Intercultural competence demands reflexivity on the part of the practitioner and a dynamic understanding of culture as practitioners work with culturally diverse stakeholders, clients and colleagues, demanding a sophisticated understanding of cultural difference across a range of cultures as well as the ability to adapt to cultures of which they have no experience.

The findings suggest that public relations cannot be discussed without considering the specific socio-cultural contexts for public relations activity. These contexts include international work, as well as work within multicultural workplaces or societies. Public relations is culturally and historically located, and the perceptions and experiences of the participants, in turn, are shaped by these contexts. For example, government policies led to different understandings of the relevance of intercultural competence to work with culturally diverse publics. The findings reveal the difficulty inherent in assuming a static understanding of culture and ignoring the cultural values underpinning public relations practise. In addition, this study reveals the difficulties inherent in describing public relations practise within nation-states as participants reported transnational work and experiences.

More critical enquiry is needed to understand the nature of public relations practise in different cultural contexts, and how the global public relations practitioner “relate[s] to the world of public relations work” (Hodges, 2006, p. 85). In particular, the influence of the dominant ideology of public relations practise (Pal & Dutta, 2008), an ideology

which is influenced by the development of public relations as primarily a Western, corporate business practise (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), and which is often reproduced in transnational public relations education, demands further investigation.

This transnational study is unique in its focus on practitioner perspectives of intercultural competence and public relations in two cities. These perspectives contribute to theoretical insights into the impact of globalization on public relations practise. The first conceptualises intercultural competence as integral to public relations practise, suggesting intercultural competence underlies and informs public relations activity. The second highlights how contemporary public relations practise negotiates culture(s), by crossing cultural boundaries within and across nations, suggesting effective public relations practise, and not simply international public relations, requires intercultural competence. The third perspective demands more consideration be given to the underlying ideology of public relations practise i.e. as a Western corporate business practise. Public relations practitioners require reflexivity, in relation to both their personal cultural heritage and to the cultural values underpinning industry practises and knowledge. The research reported in this paper reinforces the need for more scholars to interrogate the relationship between culture and public relations.

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